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The Last Wolf of Scotland

by MacGillivray (Pighog Press, 2013)

Reviewed by Greg Thomas

MacGillivray’s *The Last Wolf of Scotland* is a blood-soaked, glamorous, ambitious affair, an attempted mythopoesis of the Scottish (or Scottish-American) psyche, and of a quasi-mythical authorial persona forged through some sense of kinship with it. It’s largely a sequence of character-portraits: some of the usual suspects – MacDiarmid, Mary Queen of Scots, Ossian – some unusual ones, like fashion designer Alexander McQueen, to whom the book is dedicated, and whose work is alluded to in ‘Highland Rape’ and ‘Body Field XII.’ There are also flashpoints of violent encounter between competing worlds: those of coloniser and native, technology and myth, human and animal, Government Artillery and Jacobite.

A loose sense of narrative continuity is projected over the whole by the preface and opening poem ‘Winter Count 1864, His Scalp Lock Speaks,’ which recounts the “real-life story” of Robert McGee, a thirteen-year-old boy travelling across New Mexico with a U.S. government team in 1864, captured and scalped by Sioux Indians. Lying “unlidded in the desert,” the book is introduced as his collected hallucinations, a “dream etched onto the plate of pioneer America, his scalp lock speaking back to him [...] a near-death cinema” (Preface, 9). That first poem partly tells the story of his rescue and subsequent tours around Europe with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, taking in Scotland: “Buffalo Bill in all his skins / will mend you / Buffalo will take you down bordello” (18). But really, it’s an invocation to the muses:

Now lay me low, arrow-head sown
in torpor-pumiced skep stane,
stalked in wet dust, sweat broth talking
pinned to print, bridging the air, eyeing the motion,
with reiver veins, all re-opened;
I, museum piece of resistance,
drive your recollected imprints.

(‘Winter Count 1864, His Scalp Lock Speaks,’ 23)

Led by a bloodied hand through the rest of the sequence, we encounter various edgily recalcitrant figures, presumably all germinal or relevant in some way to the national collective unconscious (“I want to talk back to them, through McGee,” the author states. “I

want to telepathically reinvent them in the desert dust” [Preface, 10]). Sioux medicine man Black Elk is rendered in adjacent Scots and English sequences, occasionally overlapping, his voice captured on a mythologist’s phonograph:

intention gripped in a dry fist myndit claucht in a wizzen nieve
and released
keeps dropping it an lowsed
haud drappit it
speaks it to a metal foil twisted out speaks it to a metal foil swirled oot
on black-track vinyl on black-rack vinyl

(‘Black Elk,’ 26)

Later on we get a close-up of MacDiarmid:

[...] hydrocephalus crown,
rebarbative mop of hair
brushed up
into a behemoth tongue
a bladder of surprise
spurting reconstituted whisky
and liquidized brain
underlit by a small, gnostic face
spread about the bone specifically
placing sockets down
above a muscular mouth
.....

(‘If Ye Ken Stone,’ 68)

Then there are the Ossian references. ‘Riders on the Storm’ re-imagines the provenance of Jim Morrison’s lyric (arg) by overlaying it with a similar image from MacPherson’s “translated” manuscripts.

The tribe also has its matriarchal line. There are female action heroes (sharpshooter Annie Oakley burns in a health-spa bath, the story sourced – apparently – from a prefixed *Chicago Daily News* article), ethnographers (Frances Densmore records Native American voices on wax cylinder, “Spliced petrol wet grooves ... /... / sentinelled on black wax”; “a man sits before her, / recalling how to cry” [‘Frances Densmore,’ 29]) and queens of

doomed lineages. In ‘Body Field VI,’ Mary Queen of Scots (of course) wanders in a flower garden, probably awaiting execution:

blindfold, Ophelia without water,
arms extended as within,
covered irises roaming.

Huge dead-jewel costume
glistening upperside with succulent plant life
and whetted insect bordering,
.....

(‘Body Field VI,’ 79)

Then there are the familiars, the ‘Unicorns of Lascaux,’ with their “efflorescent mineral heads” (64), and Lobo the live-stock-devouring wolf of Currumpa Valley, NM, whose battle with Ernest Seton, writer and Baden-Powell-prototype, apparently involved killing Lobo’s mate Blanca to draw him in, leaving him to die “of his own accord, held in a barn”; Lobo had previously “tripped traps, scatted on strychnine and overturned poisoned mate” (‘Lobo’ [preface], 45). In the following poem, Seton seemingly takes on the body and spirit of the wolf, the hunter becoming the hunted:

He comes penumbral
skidding down
the apprentice hour
.....

pattern of vulvic claws
pads of powdered chalk,
graffiti scatalogian
of absolute rejection

(‘Wolf Car Breaking,’ 46)

Threaded throughout the collection are references to transatlantic migration and cross-pollination. In particular, we are frequently transported between Scotland’s Gaelic north-west and the Native American territories of the western U.S., inevitably setting up implied affinities between Red Indian and Gael as defenders of indigenous cultures from the forces

of colonialism and empire, both military and cultural, affinities encapsulated in the frequently returned-to term “desart,” “the Ossianic spelling of desert, used throughout the text,” which colours descriptions of the scrublands of Nevada and New Mexico (‘Winter Count 1864, His Scalp Lock Speaks’ [gloss], 15).

Occasionally, these encounters between the “civilised” and the “savage” betray a slightly maudlin infatuation with the underdog – with the doomed cultures and traditions of tinkers, gangrels, medicine men, clan warriors – which overrides any real sense of concern with possibilities of resistance to the prevailing tides of history. But although this quality on its own wouldn’t make for a useful or new sense of Scottish identity, there are also more complex ideas of nationhood at play. These poems partake of the perspectives of both wolf and tracker, ethnologist and Sioux: analogies for the construction of nation include the field-researcher’s phonographic cylinder as well as the Native American’s “winter count” pictorial calendar. National identity is not broken but forged by the clashes between these forces, a narrative of “Wild West palimpsest(s)” complemented by the lexical hybrid of Scots, Gaelic and English (Preface, 10).

Another finessed quality is in the collection’s preoccupation with the late Victorian prototypes of audio-recording and cinematography: ‘Black Maria’ seemingly alludes both to Edison’s New Jersey movie production studio – the first in America – and Eadweard Muybridge’s earlier zoopraxiscope discs, with their “[s]winging horse, vaulting horse” animations (33). Attention is also drawn to the Victorian staples of music-hall and freakshow: we spend some time with Buffalo Bill’s show, touring to Scotland with the scalped McGee and assorted Sioux captives in tow, like the imperious “smoking Sioux clown” in ‘Winter Count 1904,’ who “knocks his ash / from the waiting gum. / [...] knows them, / keeps his make-up on” (38). Thus, despite the fair amount of unscrupulous wielding of myth in its voyeuristic, escapist aspects which goes on in this text, MacGillivray is alert to the medium as well as the message of myth, the ways in which illusions or caricatures of identity can be acted out or projected for a fee-paying audience. It’s also convenient that the event which forms her thematic epicentre – the scalping – just precedes such technological developments, so McGee’s near-death hallucination becomes a “twilight cinema run[ning] on spools of dust, a zoopraxiscope encounter” (Preface, 10). The whole book is a self-conscious projection: a movie.

One problem which it seems tricky not to mention is the tendency to strike the same atmospheric notes over and over again, both semantically and phonetically. Individual contours of sound, idiom and character tend to get ground down into a kind of viscid mulch of blood, bone and peat, which primarily gives a sense of the poet’s persona writ large in every scene for ninety pages, even as it purports to flit “telepathically” between bodies. This generates a level of hamminess or gaminess which is hard to endure for long periods, and which, together with the occasionally stock cast of characters, leads some of

these pieces into the realms of self-caricature. Persistent use of the centre-aligned margin – though it looks cool, and has apposite associations of pullulation, skeletal articulation, Maggie O’Sullivan (superficially at least) – ultimately compounds the slight sense of repetition.

In conclusion though, I want to stress the sonic virtuosity of this collection at its best. It is, moreover, poetry which depends upon a certain bloody-minded self-confidence to work; for references to “Highlands Hell’s Angels” and so on to come off, the poet has to appear to believe in them absolutely. And one thing this collection doesn’t lack is belief in itself.

Some Fables

by Reitha Pattison (Grasp Press, 2011)

Reviewed by Joel Felix

In *Some Fables*, Reitha Pattison deftly engages historical periodicities of the beast fable, performing a bracing critique of the use of “large history” (Topsell’s term for his bestiary) as data upon which we infer the order of reason and providence. Indeed, the fable is a rich field to mine for the historicity of human reasoning, as the didactic mode of the fabulist claims epistemological authority through observation of the logic of beasts and causal inference to the human realm. Pattison’s poem is performing a complicated critique of this authority, but does so in a historically nuanced way, reviving a long history of ambivalences toward signification, but taking the critique a good deal further, to the very basis of knowledge in axiomatic inference disguised by the title of “the moral.” The poem phases between imperative and assertion while revealing how these very verb forms are instruments by which the human orders and damages the cosmos. Ultimately, *Some Fables* will tease at reconciliation between the deflection of axiomatic inference and the motivations that underlie critique, including her own. This reflexivity is necessary for Pattison’s poem, as it seeks to inoculate the mind to axioms while practicing sidelong substructural readings of the cosmos (and “economic cosmos”), of providence, and of the “circular card” of sidereal time, in order to reveal an axiomatic inference as mere “maxim[s] of self-help.” The indelible mark of the chapbook is the spectacle of how “[o]ver the thirsty veldt or on sea / shore the model seeks its axiom.” These, the model and the axiom in furs, are the bestiary of *Some Fables*.

Then counter pose of this work is to the fables of the putative “Aesop,” the tradition of crow, hound, tortoise, hare, frog and mouse, and cock. Pattison has indicated John Ogilby’s versification of Aesop fables as a source encounter. For this reason, it seems apt

to say a word on this figure. Ogilby’s first self-printed quarto of Aesop was produced the same year as *Leviathan*, and was just one of several commercially successful runs of Aesop texts during the period of the Civil Wars and Restoration. It’s been argued that the fables’ late return to culture rose from a hunger for a stable structure of symbolic conventions during times of upheaval. Yet Ogilby is not remembered for any such system. Just the opposite. In fact, it’s difficult to find stable satiric or didactic signification in the bestiary of this man. His biography is a fountain of failed and successful enterprises: a creator of lotteries while still a child, a talented dancer on the cusp of court success before an outrageous leap shattered his leg at the crown performance, a shipwreck survivor, a relentless commercial publisher pushing his own eccentric translations of the ancients, and, eventually, Cosmographer Royale, by court appointment. But to the point, his Aesop publications mark a transition in signification for the fable form. Ogilby undermines his reader’s longing for a stable sense of who/what was the subject of mockery. He shows striking interest in establishing in the figures (lion, dog, etc.) an autonomous authority not as symbols but as monumental neo-classical objects. In other words, the Royalist Ogilby’s unique achievement is to alter his own assertion that “examples are best precepts.” He does so by establishing an authority of signs based on their own provisionality⁴³.

The details of Ogilby’s history matter deeply and not at all to the reading *Some Fables*. They matter deeply as Pattison is a sensitive artist who shows us in this example alone how deep and rich the well of Modernism may truly be. The details matter not at all in the sense that this verse is exceptional for its quality, never mind the method or mode. I’ve picked up this chapbook periodically over the past two years, compelled by an overriding sense of its generosity. The pleasures of the verse come from many directions. The larger “cosmic” aspects of the poem travel a vertical scale of layered meanings, drawn delicately together from the zoological (beasts), zoetropical (the living in motion, zodiacal time) and the horoscopic (Lupus, Corus, Serpens), brought together in the “zootrope sunrise,” as a cosmic stack of things humans conflated with human desire. An excerpt that demonstrates the laconic elegance of Pattison’s verse:

XVII

Classical mechanics
cordiform serenade
sees the moon’s face
through sextant, bleak
horoscope, a “cosmo-

43. For more on the relationship of this transition from stable satire to provisional signs, see *The English Fable: Aesop and Literary Culture, 1650-1740* (Cambridge, 1995) by Jane Elizabeth Lewis. This account of Ogilby owes much to her work.